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The Third Place: the library as collaborative and community space in a time of fiscal restraint

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Abstract

In a period of fiscal constraint, when assumptions about the library as place are being challenged, administrators question the contribution of every expense to student success. Libraries have been successful in migrating resources and services to a digital environment accessible beyond the library. What is the role of the library as place when users do not need to visit the building to utilize library services and resources? We argue that the college library building's core role is as a space for collaborative learning and community interaction which cannot be jettisoned in the new normal.

Keywords: academic libraries, collaboration, community, library space, third place

The "new normal" is a period of fiscal constraint in which assumptions about the library as place are being challenged. The phrase 'new normal' in its current sense of a long-term shift from one set of business conditions to another has been around since the dot.com bust of 2001. The phrase was first used in this current iteration by Roger McNamee, a venture capitalist and something of a guru in the new media and information technology fields (Fast Company 2002). However, the phrase has been used to describe new long-term business conditions or changed circumstances since at least the recession of the early 1990's.[1] The term generally has connotations of tougher times in which we are exhorted to concentrate on business fundamentals rather than quick profits and visionary schemes. In this sense it is a useful way to think about librarianship in the second decade of the 21st century. Since the recession of 2007, most academic libraries have found themselves in a period of fiscal constraint as the institutions they serve and that fund them face budget cuts, calls to restrain tuition increases, declining revenues, and less income from endowments.

There is, however, another sense in which librarianship and libraries find themselves in a new normal. Over the last four decades academic libraries have been extraordinarily successful in migrating from analog, or print-based, services and collections towards digital, networked services and collections. We have now reached the point at which most, if not all, academic libraries in the United States are now hybrid operations of both analog and digital services and collections and many libraries are beginning to contemplate a purely legacy role for their print collections.

[1] See Gwyn, Richard. 1992. "Maybe this cary economy is the new normal." *The Toronto Star*, August 2, 1992, B3. Lexis-Nexis Academic, accessed September 14, 2010, and Julie Bawden Davis. "Assistance for Victims and Witnesses." *Orange Coast Magazine*, February 1990, 168. Google Books (accessed September 20, 2010).

In a hybrid information environment in which the digital dominates, and an economic environment in which institutions face the long-term prospect of tight budgets, administrators question the contribution of every expense to the bottom-line of student success. Essentially, the question is; what is the role of the library as a physical place when users do not need to visit a library building to use library services or resources? This question is not only being asked by administrators. Ironically, in an age in which much of our lives have moved into a digital space, physical space remains the coin of the realm in higher education. Faculty members, if they have not already done so, are eager to recapture space in academic buildings previously devoted to departmental libraries. Main libraries facilities, often occupying prime real estate at the center of campus, have also become contested spaces with some faculty members questioning the continuing relevance of such enterprises (Ithaka 2009), and others conducting rear-guard actions against remote storage of print collections and demanding that all books remain on the central campus (Howard 2009).

Students are voting with their feet and conducting their library research from any wired or wireless networked location. The old librarian's lament at seeing a senior enter the library for the first time is no longer relevant. In many cases it is now possible for students to graduate having made full use of the library's digital resources and services, and thus made quite adequate use of the library's resources and services in general, from locations outside of the library. Unless librarians create conditions under which the library building is used for something other than information retrieval, students will continue to move elsewhere.

We argue that the core role of the library building in the next decade will not be as a storehouse of collections or as a central point of information service, although in our hybrid environment it will continue to play both those roles. The core role of the library as a place, the new normal for library buildings, is as a place of collaborative learning and community

interaction. Further, we argue that this role cannot be jettisoned during a time of fiscal constraint. Librarians must not use the new normal as an excuse for retrenchment. This not only makes practical economic and educational sense, but is also historically grounded in the ancient role of libraries as places of community and collaboration. A history that, in the 20th century, had been put aside as print collections ballooned during the information explosion of the second half of the 20th century and the use of library space moved from people to print.

As users increasingly gained the ability to use library services and collections from outside the library building, and as libraries faced increased competition from online information service providers, academic librarians focused on marketing and advocacy as a way to entice users back into the library building. A review of an early bibliography of marketing in libraries and of records in EBSCO's Library, Information Science, and Technology Abstracts (LISTA) database show an early concern among librarians to market innovative online mediated search systems in the 1970's (Norman 1989). But as early as 1980 Edinger argued for marketing as a strategy for library survival (Edinger 1980). And in 1982 Blaise Cronin argued that the "electronic information age" required librarians to market their services (Cronin 1982).

The most prominent example of this marketing trend is the Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) marketing campaign @Your Library (ACRL 2010). That campaign markets the library and seeks to inform people about the continuing importance of librarians in education and research. In addition, it aims to increase the visibility of librarians and promote librarianship as a career. However, from the very branding of the campaign -- @Your Library, which plays with a symbol that connotes both digital (e-mail) and place 'at' -- the physical library is an integral part of the campaign.

However, it is our contention that, in the face of a historic societal trend from print to digital, a trend that continues to transform our sense of community, place, geography and space

throughout our lives, we cannot persuade our users to return to a way that is inconvenient and no longer necessary. Marketing library services that remain relevant to users is important, but simply marketing the library as a worthy place on our campuses will not bring users back into the library building. Instead we must fulfill the continuing needs of our users for information organization, access, instruction, and assistance in new ways that take into account the new realities, and we must do the same with library space. In the traditional sense, we cannot *market* the importance of the library as place to our users; we must *be* an important place in their lives. As Brian Matthews, formerly the User Experience Librarian at Georgia Institute of Technology, and now Assistant University Librarian at UC Santa Barbara, put it in his ground-breaking book *Marketing Today's Academic Library*,

> We must demonstrate our value through applied relevance, instead of fabricating implied needs. On a grand scale, we need to stop thinking in terms of the user being in the library and instead consider how the library fits into the life of the user. (Matthews 2009)

The important role for college and undergraduate library spaces, when less space is needed to house collections, the role that our users want us to play in their lives, is as flexible spaces for collaborative work and in which they can be part of a self-created community.

This argument is not entirely new. The changing role of 'library as place' has been a growing concern throughout the first decade of the 21st century. A 2003 article by Scott Bennett surveyed academic library directors who supervised building renovations during the 1990s. In it he characterized the library as a "service place" and as a "learning place." The library as a "service place" is the traditional view of the building where information is held, organized and managed (Bennett 2003). The concept of the library as a "learning space" recognizes that the main activity and focus of the library is "facilitating social exchanges through which information is transformed into the knowledge of one person or group of persons" (Bennett 2003). The

fundamental change Bennett addressed in his research is the way in which people's use of the library building directly impacts how the space should be designed.

Bennett's research explored the motivating factors guiding the 1990s renovations. The strongest motivating factor, cited by 57% of respondents, was the need to accommodate the growing print collection by expanding the shelving or designing off-campus storage facilities. Bennett stated that this factor was an example of extrapolative planning exemplifying, "traditional library services" which identified the building as a place where information is held (Bennett 2003). The second strongest motivator, cited by 45% of respondents, was the "changing characteristics of student study space needs" (Bennett 2003). Bennett argued that this motivator indicated a need to use interpolative planning as opposed to extrapolative planning in redesigning space. Interpolative planning involved focusing on "the uses of library space that cannot be simply predicted from past patterns of use" such as the users' need to create their own space for learning (Bennett 2003). The survey indicated how important it is for libraries to plan for what students may need in the future, needs that may divert resources from traditional library services.

Bennett's survey revealed that academic libraries were becoming interested in creating more space for the user. Library directors repeatedly commented on the need to focus more on the user, group study space, and the need for social spaces in the library. The demand for social spaces in the library whether it be lounges, cafes or outdoor seating illustrated the need to accommodate the user and provide them an environment which they find conducive to their learning. Academic libraries experienced a shift focusing more on their users or learners and their need for space rather than on creating more space for the collection (Bennett 2009).

Demas and Scherer also address the importance of library space and its purpose in the community. In their article "Esprit de Place," Demas and Scherer state that libraries satisfy an

important need for people to be a part of the community. They discuss various uses of space, how these contribute to building community and a sense of a place, and how transcendent and transportive spaces relate to the library building. Transcendent space extends beyond the brick walls of the building to educating the users about ideas and concepts relevant in the community (Demas 2002). Transportive space in the library involves design which inspires patrons and enhances their unique experience while in the library. Through the use of transcendent and transportive spaces, libraries give the users the opportunity to connect with the library and community. Such spaces make the library a "serious, welcoming and enjoyable physical destination" (Demas 2002).

In his book *The Great Good Place,* sociologist Ray Oldenburg posited the concept of the "third place," a place where people choose to go that is outside of their work or home (Oldenburg, 1999.) When considering the role of the library building and the needs of the users, the library can become the "third place" giving them a place to meet and create a sense of community. At first glance, the phrase "third place" is not one American librarians may want to equate with their locus of professional practice. In America's competitive culture "third place" often evokes an image of doing well enough to gain recognition, but not winning a competition. But Oldenburg's third place is relevant. According to Oldenburg, a "third place" provides people with the space to engage in conversation and build a sense of community. A third place offers a comfortable welcoming environment for informal gathering where people come and go at their leisure and "nobody plays host" (Oldenburg 1999). The relaxed atmosphere of the third place provides users with the chance to be around others where they are not restricted by time, nor are they compelled to be there. The comfortable setting of the third place provides users with a place to relax, feel at home, and be themselves.

The third place also gives people the opportunity to interact with others of different social ranks, philosophies and interests. The allure of third places is not the beauty of the location, but rather other people in that place. People are stimulated by the fact that third places offer familiar faces but also satisfy their expectation of seeing new ones (Oldenburg 1999). The library as a third place provides faculty members and students a place to comfortably meet others from different economic or social backgrounds, different disciplines, and different areas of the academy. Demas and Scherer highlight the fact that transcendent spaces, like third places, "create opportunities for people who do not necessarily travel in the same disciplinary, social, political, or economic circles to frequently meet and greet each other" (Demas 2002). Comfortable third places provide an inclusive environment giving users the opportunity to meet new people with new ideas. Those who spend time at third places also find comfort in seeing familiar strangers. These individuals may not interact, and yet spending time at the third place provides a common bond and a familiarity in their relationship. Libraries are, and will continue to be, open spaces for all users to take advantage of and thus are naturally inclusive – third -- places.

In these comfortable, welcoming environments, conversation is the main activity. People engage freely with each other discussing topics of interest. In the third place, conversation is valued and the tone is playful and the "mood is light" (Oldenburg 1999). People participating in the discussion are expected to enhance it and not detract from it. Oldenburg states that the diverse makeup of the third place prevents a singular voice from dominating the dialogue (Oldenburg 1999). The conversation in a third place gives people the opportunity to share their experiences while learning from other people and the social engagement that occurs in the third place evolves from the conversation. Thinking about the library as a third place recognizes that conversation contributes to the welcoming and comfortable atmosphere that

users seek. Oldenburg is referring to spoken conversation between individuals, but in a very real sense the conversation can also include the scholarly communication through time as people engage with the library's information resources.

The relaxed atmosphere and open conversation of the third place satisfies the user's need for human connection. For many users, the third place provides the opportunity to meet with others and discuss topics of interest. They enjoy the conversation and socialization a third place offers along with the opportunity to interact with familiar faces and meet new ones. For other users, human connection involves being part of the group without necessarily being "in" the group. In many libraries, these users are interested in being around others but at the same time want to maintain their privacy. The social interaction available in libraries is an allure, but users can also choose to be alone in that academic space. Demas emphasizes that a popular draw of academic libraries "is the unique pleasure of being alone, in a quiet place, while simultaneously being in a public place associated with scholarship" (Demas 2005).

People who frequent third places create community. The open conversation and relaxed atmosphere engages them and makes them the focus of the third place. The conversations generated make them feel like it is their place – a place created for their use. The personal relationships that draw people to the third place along with the relaxed atmosphere develop a sense of community. Demas and Scherer state that because it draws people together, the library building is a "vital agent in community-building" (Demas 2002). Bennett's study quoted one director with regards to the academic library as a community space as stating, "'this is their [the students] community now. They've left home; this is their world.'" (Bennett 2003) The library as the third place creates a vibrant community, giving users the opportunity to be themselves and take advantage of what the library building provides.

NetGen students, millennials, or digital natives have caused a significant shift in the pedagogy delivered by professors in colleges and universities. College and university instruction now involves more discussion rather than lecture. The focus has shifted to the students engaging with information and with each other and away from the instructor simply providing the information. Learning has become more social and collaborative. In addition, there is greater recognition that much of the learning is occurring outside the classroom, in informal learning spaces where students are comfortable and feel welcomed.

Social learning emphasizes the role of the student in the learning process. As an integral part of the pedagogy, students work together to understand concepts and create knowledge. Brown and Adler define social learning as:

> based on the premise that our understanding of content is socially constructed through conversations about that content and through grounded interactions especially with others around problems or actions. (Brown 2008)

In this learning environment, students are expected to participate. They are expected to express their viewpoints and contribute to the conversation. Social learning requires students to have space to gather, converse, and share their knowledge outside the classroom, the dorm room, or home. The space students need has to be a third place where they feel comfortable and welcomed.

Colleges and universities must create third places for their students. According to Oldenburg, higher education administrators need to encourage conversation and learning outside the classroom (Oldenburg 1997). The campus library can provide students with a place for social learning and conversation. In Bennett's survey, library directors overwhelmingly argued for the importance of libraries providing space for the users to meet. One director stated that the library satisfies the "basic human need for comfortable space." (Bennett 2003) Demas and Scherer remarked that libraries as transportive spaces must include warmth and

style in their design making it an inviting place for the user. Giving students a third place allows them to create connections with each other. These connections create their community, which Oldenburg asserts contributes to personal growth. For a successful third place on campus, Oldenburg sets three parameters. They are that it must:

be easy to get to,

provide food & drink, and

have a design that invites students in and allows them to linger.

Oldenburg stresses that third places, or hangouts, on campus contribute to learning by allowing students the opportunity to build community. Their community helps them grow and develop outside the classroom. In her article examining the role of the library and NetGen students, Joan Lippincott states that, "libraries can promote community by providing comfortable spaces for informal gatherings of students" (Lippincott 2005). But the community in third places is not comprised exclusively of students. Faculty members are also users of third places. They can meet students in these informal learning and social environments, contribute to the conversation and be active members of the third place community.

For many colleges and universities, the term community is central to their mission. At Rollins College, community is one of the three guiding principles in the college's mission statement (Rollins College 2009). While the focus of community at Rollins is engagement with the community, both global and local, beyond the campus, the concept of community creates a sense of belonging among students giving them a common bond. In an analysis of mission statements of Canadian universities, researchers found that the value of community ranked 5th out of the 12 core values identified among various institutions (Kreber 2007). Within the value of community, institutions emphasized cooperation and collaboration as the focus of community on their campus. The library as a third place provides users the space to learn from

each other and build a community of learners. It demonstrates how academic libraries are advancing the mission of the academy by evolving into a place for active learning where students create their community.

As a part of their educational experience, the library as a third place creates among its users a fondness and attachment to that place. The users develop a sense of loyalty, inspiring them to return regularly while enrolled in the institution. More importantly, creating a third place community can evolve into a stronger connection among alumni to their alma mater (Young 2010). The qualities of the users who comprise the third place community, making it their own, can extend beyond the present use and into future institutional support. Thus the library's role as a third place in the academic community can contribute to student success, student retention, and alumni support. It is important that academic administrators understand the contribution the library can play in these key institutional goals.

At Olin Library we have taken strides to develop the building into a third place on campus. We revised our mission statement to include the phrase, "a welcoming environment for the Rollins community" (Olin Library 2007). The library created a new librarian position whose role is to consciously think about the library as a third place. While one element within this is to reach out to the campus community and coordinate the displays and events, the most important task is to focus on the library as a third place and ensure that we remove as many impediments as possible to the users' taking control of the space to meet their own learning and social needs, while still maintaining exceptional information services and resources. We eliminated our food and drink policy and expanded the offerings and hours of a café at the center of the building. We transformed the main floor of the building into an area for open conversation and discussion. Students can meet classmates and discuss material or just chat with one another. Students can also meet in group study spaces located throughout the

building. Often faculty members and students meet in the library and discuss issues or interests. Class and meeting rooms, bookable within the campus wide events scheduling system, encourage students, faculty, and staff to view the library building as a convenient place to meet both formally and informally. We have been so successful that the students affectionately refer to the library as "Club Olin."

Knowing the student's need for a variety of spaces, the library maintains quiet and individual study spaces on separate floors. The challenge we face is to balance the desire for our users to feel welcomed and comfortable while at the same time fulfilling their need for a quiet library that inspires studying and learning. Our library staff members work hard not to be perceived as 'the library police.' The atmosphere in particular spaces and floors is self-regulated by the people using those spaces. We have also worked to develop partnerships with campus departments and become involved in student activities and events. The library has hosted film showing for the Global Peace Film Festival, election night parties, book discussion groups, and during orientation the entire building is given over to academic advising.

Through these partnerships, the library has dedicated exhibit space in the lobby to promote campus events and issues that are important or of interest to our users. So that, while in many libraries displays and exhibits are designed to highlight the resources of the library (and, by implication, why someone might want to make more use of those resources) in the Olin Library we actively discourage the addition of books and other library materials to displays and exhibits. Books, unless they are rare or lavishly illustrated, are inherently uninteresting to look at. After all, Ranganathan in his first law did not say books are to look at. No, he stated, "books are for use" (Ranganathan 2006). By placing books in displays, often behind glass, and certainly not where users expect to find them, librarians make them less accessible than they might normally be. We also make the implicit statement to our users that the library is there to

present materials and ideas to the user, instead of a place in which the user has control. Therefore, at the Olin Library, we seek opportunities to present student art work, class projects, student organization events and issues, and to link to the events and issues important to other elements of the College like the Winter Park Institute, Winter With the Writers, the Cornell Fine Arts Museum, First Year Explorations, and the Office of Multicultural Affairs.[2] This gives the Rollins community a sense that the library is their space, a space they control and within which they can expect to make statements and initiate conversations that are important to them and of interest to their fellow community members.

During the process of transforming our building into one centered on our users, like most college libraries in the 'new normal,' the library has not gained any additional funding for remodeling or renovation. Working with an external consultant, we streamlined our book ordering and processing work flow. The new process, combined with a number of staff retirements, provided an opportunity to reduce staff in our Technical Services Department. Those funds were reallocated, enabling the library to hire the new public services librarian mentioned above, with a focus on the user experience and the library's role as a third place. Even with that reallocation we have a lower total FTE than we had in 2006. That position and its focus on the user experience, further demonstrates our commitment to our users and their experience in the library. In our partnership with other groups on campus, the library has seen nominal increases in its food and printing expenses in order to make the events successful. To date, Olin Library has taken intentional steps to reorient the building to serve the user's learning needs. We intend to continue investigating their needs through focus groups, surveys, or observation in order to make the library the "third place" on campus.

[2] Each of these organizations maintains a website within http://www.rollins.edu.

As college librarians we must not let the fiscal constraints of the new normal restrict our imaginations as we seek to partner with our users in creating the college library of the 21st century. It is too easy to retreat into more traditional forms of librarianship in the face of tight budgets and reduced staffing. Instead, just as academic administrations are questioning many of the "sacred cows" of 20th century college life, we should also continue to investigate and question the role of the library as place in our users' lives. When we look at the library from our users' perspective it is our contention that the development in the last decade of the user-centric library will turn out to be more valuable and contribute more to the bottom line of student success than some of our more traditional uses of space.

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